



AT THE GATE

By E. Nesbit

DRAWN BY CHARLES LOUIS HINTON

THE monastery towers, as pure and fair
As virgin vows, reached up white hands to Heaven;
The walls to guard the hidden heart of prayer
Were strong as sin, and white as sin forgiven.
And there came holy men, by world's woe driven;
And, all about, the gold-green meadows lay
Lower-decked, like children dear that keep May-holiday.

"Here," said the Abbot, "let us spend our days,
Days sweetened by the lilies of pure prayer,
Hung with white garlands of the rose of praise;
And—lest the world should enter with her snare,
Should enter and laugh and take us unaware
With her red rose, her purple and her gold—
Hoose we a stranger's hand the porter's keys to hold."

They chose a beggar from the world outside
To keep their world-ward door for them, and he,
Filled with a humble and adoring pride,
Built up a wall of proud humility
Between the monastery's sanctity
And the poor, foolish, helpless folk who came
To ask for love and care—in the dear Saviour's name.

Or when the poor crept to the guarded gate
To ask for succor; when the tired asked rest;
Then weary souls, bereft and desolate,
Craved comfort; when the murmur of the oppressed
Surged round the grove where Prayer had made her nest,
The porter bade such take their griefs away
And at some other door their bane and burden lay.

For this," he said, "is the white house of prayer
Where, day and night, the holy voices rise
Through the chill trouble of our earthly air
And enter at the gate of Paradise.
Trample no more our flower-fields in such wise,
Or crave the alms of our deep-laden bough;
The prayers of holy men are alms enough, I trow."

Seeing that no sick or sorrowing folk
Came ever to be healed or comforted,
The Abbot to his Brothers gladly spoke:
"God has accepted our poor prayers," he said;
"Over our land His answering smile is spread;
He has put forth His strong and loving hand,
And sorrow and sin and pain have ceased in all the land.

So make we yet more rich our hymns of praise;
Warm we our prayers against our happy heart;
Once God hath taken the gift of all our days
To wake a spell that bids all wrong depart,
Has turned our praise to balm for the world's smart,
Filled of prayer and praise be every hour
Or God transfigures praise and transmutes prayer to power."

Went the years; the flowers blossomed now
Untrampled by the dusty, weary feet;
Broken hung the green and golden bough,
For none came now to ask for fruit or meat—
For ghostly food, or common bread to eat;
Id dreaming, praying, the monks were satisfied
If, God remembering him, the beggar-porter died.

Then they had covered up the foolish head
And on the blind and loving heart heaped clay,
Which of us, Brothers, now," the Abbot said,
"Will face the world—to keep the world away?"
But all their hearts were hard with prayer, and "Nay,"
They cried, "Ah, bid us not our prayers to leave.
—Father! not to-day—for this is Easter eve!"

And while they murmured, to their midst there came
A beggar, saying, "Brothers, peace be still!
From your Brother, by Our Father's name,

And I will be your porter, if ye will,
Guarding your gate with what I have of skill."
So all they welcomed him and closed the door,
And gat them gladly back unto their prayers once more.

But lo! no sooner did the prayer arise,
A golden flame athwart the chapel dim,
Than came the porter, crying, "Haste, arise,
A sick old man waits you to tend on him;
And many wait—a knight whose wound gapes grim,
A red-stained man, with red sins to confess,
A white-faced mother who brings her child for you to bless."

The Brothers hastened to the gate, and there
With unaccustomed hand and voice they tried
To ease the body's pain, the spirit's care;
But, ere the task was done, the porter cried,
"Behold, the Lord sets your gate open wide,
For here be starving folk who must be fed,
And little ones that cry for love and daily bread!"

And with each slow-foot hour came ever a throng
Of piteous wanderers, sinful folk and sad;
And still the Brothers ministered, but long
The day seemed, with no prayer to make them glad.
No holy meditative joys they had,
No moment's brooding-place could poor prayer find
'Mid all those hearts to heal and all those wounds to bind.

And when the crowded sunlit day at last
Left the field lonely with its trampled flowers,
Into the chapel's peace the Brothers passed
To quell the memory of those hurrying hours.
"Our holy time," they said, "once more is ours!
Come, let us pay our debt of prayer and praise,
Forgetting in God's light the darkness of man's ways!"

But ere their voices reached the first psalm's end
They heard a new, strange rustling round their house.
Then came the porter: "Here comes many a friend
Pushing aside your budding orchard boughs.
Come, Brothers, justify your holy vows;
Here be God's patient, poor four-footed things;
Seek healing at God's well, whence lovingkindness
springs."

Then cried the Abbot in a vexed amaze:
"Our brethren we must aid, if 'tis God's will,
But the wild creatures of the forest ways
Himself God heals with His Almighty skill.
And charity is good, and love—but still
God shall not look in vain for the white prayers
We send on silvery feet to climb the starry stairs.

"For, of all worthy things, prayer has most worth,
It rises like sweet incense up to Heaven,
And from God's hand falls back upon the earth,
Being of Heavenly bread the accepted leaven.
Through prayer is virtue saved and sin forgiven,
In prayer the impulse and the force are found
That bring, in purple and gold, the fruitful seasons round.

"For prayer comes down from Heaven in the sun
That giveth life and joy to all things made;
Prayer falls in rain to make broad rivers run,
And wake the seeds in earth's brown bosom laid;
By prayer the red-hung branch is earthward weighed;
By prayer the barn grows full, and full the fold,
For by man's prayer God works His wonders manifold!"

The porter bowed his head to the reproof,
But when the echo of the night's last prayer
Died in the mystery of the vaulted roof,

A whispered memory in the hallowed air,
The Abbot turned to find, still standing there,
The porter, and his face was still bowed down
As when it humbly bent before the Abbot's frown.

"Brother," the porter spoke, "I crave thy leave
To leave thee—for to-night I journey far—
But I have kept your gate this Easter eve,
And now your house to Heaven shines like a star
To show the Angels where God's children are;
And in this day your house has served God more
Than in the praise and prayer of all its days before.

"Yet I must leave you—though I fain would stay—
For there are other gates I go to keep
Of houses round whose walls, long day by day,
Shut out of hope and love, poor sinners weep;
Barred folds that keep out God's poor wandering sheep;
I must teach these that gates where God comes in
Cannot be shut at all to pain or want or sin.

"The voice of Prayer is very soft and weak,
And Sorrow and Sin have voices very strong;
Prayer is not heard in Heaven when those twain speak;
The voice of Prayer faints in the voice of Wrong
By the just man endured—oh, Lord, how long!
If ye would have your prayers in Heaven be heard
Look that Wrong clamor not with too intense a word!

"But when true love is shed on want and sin
Their cry is changed, and grows to such a voice
As clamors sweetly at Heaven to be let in—
Such sound as makes the saints in Heaven rejoice—
Pure gold of prayer, purged of the vain alloys
Of idleness—that is the sound most dear
Of all the earthly sounds God leans from Heaven to hear.

"Oh, Brother, I must leave thee, and for Me
The work is heavy and the burden great.
Thine be this charge I lay upon thee: See
That never again stands barred thy abbey gate;
Look that God's poor be not left desolate.
Ah, me! that children My shepherds needs must be
When My poor wandering sheep have so great need of Me!

"Brother, forgive thy Brother if He chide,
Thy Brother loves thee—and has loved. For see,
The nails are in My hands, and in My side
The spear-wound; and the thorns weigh heavily
Upon My brow. Brother, I died for thee—
For thee and for My sheep that are astray,
And rose to live for thee, and them, on Easter Day!"

"My Master and my Lord!" the Abbot cried.
But, where that Face had been, shone the new day.
Only, on the marble by the Abbot's side,
Where those dear Feet had stood, a lily lay—
A lily white for the white Easter Day.
He sought the gate—no sorrow clamored there,
And, not till then, he dared to sink his soul in prayer.

And from that day himself he kept the gate
Wide open; and the poor from far and wide,
The weary and wicked, and disconsolate,
Came there for succor and were not denied;
The sick were healed, the repentant sanctified,
And from their hearts go up more prayer and praise
Than ever the abbey knew in all its prayer-filled days.

And there the Heavenly vision comes no more,
Only, each Eastern morn, a lily sweet
Lies white and dewy on the chancel floor
Where once stood the beloved wounded Feet;
And the old Abbot feels the nearing beat
Of wings that bring him leave at last to go
And meet his Master, where the immortal lilies grow.

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